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THE HIGH COST OF THE PORK BARREL

BY JOSEPH E. RANSDELL,

United States Senator from Louisiana.

The term "pork barrel" has been so freely used in the press and various public addresses that it is well to understand its meaning before attempting to discuss it. In its general acceptation, "pork," as applied to Congressional legislation, means an appropriation by Congress for an unworthy purpose that is not for the public good and useful to the nation, but is for the private benefit of the Congressman who secures it, or for one or more of his constituents. The term conveys the idea that certain classes of legislation such as pensions, public buildings, rivers and harbors, and some other bills, if not wholly reprehensible, contain many improper items for objects which should have no place in acts of Congress. These bills are made to appear similar to the parable of the sower who got the cockle mixed with his wheat. Their wise provisions which help the public and promote the general welfare constitute the wheat, and the selfish, unjust, and unwise items are the cockle, or "pork."

It has been observed that critics of "pork" always find it in other Congressmen's projects, never in their own. The appropriations for rivers, public buildings, and pensions in the district of Congressman A, the critic, are all right, in his opinion, and are without the slightest scent of "pork"; that smell exudes only from sums to be expended in the district of Congressman B. What a difference it makes whose ox is gored! In the press it is usually found that the severest critics of "pork"—especially river and harbor "pork," and more especially *river* "pork," since we seldom hear of *harbor* "pork"—are those publications closely allied to certain railroads which oppose river improvements because they fear water competition. The French say "*Cherchez la femme*"—"find the woman." I have no doubt that when we "find the woman" in the case of most of these publicists, who see so many motes in the eyes of so-called "pork barrel" Congressmen, it would not require glasses to discover railroad beams in their eyes.

Senator Burton Denounces Charge of "Pork Barrel"

Ex-Senator Burton of Ohio, who for ten years was chairman of the River and Harbor Committee of the House of Representatives, said before the Convention of the National Rivers and Harbors Congress in December, 1909 (See Convention proceedings, page 106):

My friends, the president of this congress will say to you that we have known no North, no South, no East, no West in the years we have been together. We have taken up projects according to the measure of their merit, and I can vouch that members of the committee in many instances have leaned over backward where their own localities were involved, and have given closer attention to projects in other places. . . . You have had to meet the idea that there is a pork barrel somewhere. Whenever there is a man of superficial information on this subject, or one who has had some project that has been turned down hard because it had to be turned down, that man begins to talk about the pork barrel. There has been no line of appropriations made by this government more carefully guarded than appropriations for rivers and harbors. . . . I challenge anyone to cite an instance where that bill has ever been made up to gratify certain localities or to advance the interests of some member of Congress in the House or Senate. . . . There has been no log rolling, no pork barrel, no regard for individual prospects or anything of the sort, no regard for any particular locality in the country.

What can I add to these words? Mr. Burton surely knew all about river and harbor legislation, and he had no motive to misrepresent facts.

As river and harbor legislation is the greatest sufferer from pork barrel slanders, I will take that up first, and later give some attention to public buildings and pensions.

Slanders

It is said of one of the famous French atheists, who despised Christianity with the utmost venom, that he told his followers; "Lie, lie, lie, some of your lies will stick." I sometimes wonder if this method is not taught by the enemies of river and harbor legislation, for it is hard to conceive otherwise how such baseless fabrications have been repeated again and again until many well disposed but ignorant people believe them to be true.

I have quoted above what ex-Senator Burton says about river and harbor "pork," and his indignant statement that "there has been no log rolling, no pork barrel, no regard for individual prospects, or anything of the sort, no regard for any particular locality in the country" in the preparation of river and harbor bills.

I was for twelve years a member of the Rivers and Harbors Committee of the House of Representatives, and for the past three years have been on the Commerce Committee of the Senate, which has charge of river and harbor legislation. Moreover, this subject has been a hobby with me, and I have studied it closely and from every angle for the past fifteen years; hence, I ought to be a fairly competent witness. Every word uttered by Senator Burton is true. The committees of Congress did their utmost to enact laws in regard to rivers and harbors that were fair, just, and beneficial to the public at large, regardless of individual Congressmen, or private interests. I do not pretend to say that no mistakes were made, for to "err is human," but I insist, for reasons that I will explain later, that fewer errors were made in the preparation and passage of river and harbor bills than in any class of legislation enacted by Congress. I deny with all the force of my being that there was any real "pork" in the river and harbor bills passed by Congress during the past fifteen years, and defy anyone to prove the contrary. I know that appropriations for certain projects have been criticized and held up to scorn and ridicule, but it is so easy to make an assertion, and so hard to disprove a slander. We are prone to believe everything evil we hear. The rules of legal evidence say that he who asserts must prove, but how much proof does the ordinary man require to convince him that a plausible story about some man's dishonesty or some woman's lapse from virtue is true?

The charge of "pork" in river and harbor legislation in effect is that the prominent people who advocated the project, the United States engineers who recommended it, and the members of Congress—especially the House Committee on Rivers and Harbors, and the Senate Committee on Commerce—are grafters; that they have looted the Treasury; that they have put their hands in a barrel and pulled money or "pork" which belonged to the public and used it for corrupt purposes.

If we analyze this charge, it appears unreasonable on its face. If we were to grant that the local people who urge the project on Congress because of selfish interest—for their communities, not for themselves personally—are corrupt, and that their influence with their own senators and representatives could induce these officials to favor the project, then surely the ten United States engineers who must give it their approval before it has any standing before

Congress have no motive for promoting a vicious project; and the Congressional committees charged with the duty of studying and reporting on it to their colleagues in both Houses can have no reason or incentive for favoring a project which is bad and unworthy, as it does not affect them or their people.

Splendid Safeguards for Waterway Appropriations

No bills that come before Congress are better safeguarded than those making appropriations for waterways, and it is almost impossible to put through an unworthy project. Following is a brief statement of the steps preceding the adoption of a project; whether it be one of great general importance costing millions, or some obscure river or inlet of only local interest, the process is the same.

A bill is introduced in the House or Senate asking a survey of the proposed project, and, if thought worthy on *prima facia* showing, the survey is included in the next river and harbor bill. The Chief of Engineers then directs the United States engineer in charge of the locality, usually an officer with the rank of captain or major, to make a preliminary examination and report, showing feasibility, prospective cost and benefits, and every ascertainable fact. This report goes first to the colonel in charge of the division, then to the Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors, composed of seven United States engineers of high rank, and finally to the Chief of Engineers. If the local engineer reports adversely, that usually settles it, and the matter is dropped, though occasionally he is overruled by his superiors. If the local engineer finds the project apparently worthy, he so reports, and his opinion, after most careful consideration by his superiors, is affirmed or disapproved.

Should the Chief of Engineers, in the light of all the facts and suggestions of the local engineer, the division engineer, and the Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors, conclude that the project is worthy of an actual survey, it is ordered referred back to the local engineer. A survey party is then placed in the field and an elaborate survey is made to ascertain every fact bearing upon the project, including cost, commerce present and prospective, and everything helpful to Congress in reaching a final conclusion upon its merits and demerits. This survey usually requires several months, and, in the very important projects, one or more years, and no reasonable expense is spared to get all the facts. The report

then goes to the division engineer, who attaches his views and forwards it to the Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors.

This board has offices in the city of Washington, and in addition to a careful review of the reports of the local and division engineers, it gives hearings, pro and con, to interested persons. Moreover, if the project is a costly one, the board frequently examines it in person, as it did recently when the entire membership of seven colonels investigated the Missouri River below Kansas City. The findings of this board, accompanied by reports, evidence, maps, etc., then go to the Chief of Engineers, who renders a final decision, which is transmitted through the Secretary of War to Congress, and the whole record is published as a public document for all the world to see. And if the project is not regarded as worthy either by the Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors or the Chief of Engineers, it is not considered as having legislative status. In other words, Congress will not appropriate for waterway projects unless approved as above indicated, except in very rare cases when the amount involved is quite small and Congress has conducted an independent investigation for itself.

Bear in mind that the United States engineers are the honor men of West Point, the pick and flower of the American army; that many of the ablest and best men of our republic, including the builders of the Panama Canal, have been United States engineers; that they have disbursed over three-fourths of a billion dollars on waterways with only one scandal—that at Savannah; that they hold office for life; that they are not interested personally in the localities where they serve for three or four years and then leave, never to return in most cases; that not only one engineer, but *ten*, must investigate and report in writing for publication upon a waterway project before Congress will consider it.

How would it be possible for anything smelling of "pork" or graft to run such a gauntlet? The charge of "pork" in connection with river and harbor legislation is preposterous. It is made by enemies of waterway legislation who have no regard for truth.

River and harbor bills are not pork barrel bills, but commerce builders.

Public Buildings Teach Patriotism

Appropriations for public buildings to be used by Congress and by the departments of the government at Washington, and for

use as customhouses, courts, post offices, etc., throughout the republic, have been sharply criticized and the cry of "pork" frequently leveled at them. Perhaps a few of these buildings were not really needed and too great expense may have been incurred in constructing some of them. The scope of this article does not permit a detailed discussion, but let me suggest that all these buildings, without a single exception, were for the use and benefit of the general public, and could not, except in the most indirect way, be of any advantage to private persons, though the Congressman who secured them received the plaudits of his constituents, and in some instances obtained political rewards. These expenditures were all investments and the government owns the buildings and other property in evidence thereof. Some were wise and returned large interest on their cost; others were not so good, but in the main they have turned out as well as average real estate investments.

As an instance of how substantially our government usually builds, let me relate a personal experience at the city of San Francisco. Mrs. Ransdell and I visited its ruins a few months after the great earthquake and fire. We traveled for miles through a scene of awful desolation with masses of every imaginable building material which fire could not consume, scattered and twisted and gnarled in the most inextricable confusion. The splendid city hall erected at a cost of seven millions was completely destroyed. The only structures which withstood the shock of quake and fire were the United States post office and customhouse. They were somewhat injured, but business was being conducted in them, and everything near them was in ruins. I could not have believed this had I not seen it myself.

Let me emphasize one feature connected with public buildings that is often overlooked, and that is their great value as teachers of patriotism. In many interior towns, where the population is about four thousand and upwards, are public buildings used for the local post office and federal court. These buildings in the smaller places rarely cost over fifty thousand dollars but they are built in the best style of architecture, and of the very best material. It is the most notable structure in the town, and is the observed and admired of all observers. To look at it makes one proud he is an American citizen. The United States flag is always flying over it—an emblem of our National Union, power, and glory; our right

to free speech and free conscience, and all that makes a government loved and honored by its people. In some localities the stars and stripes are seldom seen except on the staff of a public building, where they sing a continuous anth~~o~~ft in honor of our country, and teach patriotism three hundred and sixty-five days in every year.

Surely river and harbor and public building legislation is not fairly open to the charge of "pork," but the same cannot be said of our pension bill.

The Pension Abuses

A discussion of the abuses of our pension system is a delicate and difficult matter. Patriotism is a virtue which is implanted deep in the American heart, and a leading attribute of patriotism is gratitude to those who have shed their blood in their country's defense—who heard and answered her appeal in time of direst need. No one, and certainly not I, would deprive any soldier who was disabled in the service of his country of a pension. Every dependent widow of a soldier who was killed or disabled while fighting for his native land should be pensioned. What I shall say is aimed not at our pension system, but at its abuses—abuses which have made the title "pensioner" appear more like a term of dishonor than a badge of glory.

Since the beginning of our government we have expended \$5,025,193,970 for pensions—a sum more than six times as great as all river and harbor appropriations during the same period, and two-thirds more than all navy expenditures during that time. Of this colossal sum, all but \$96,000,000, or \$4,928,748,525, has been distributed since 1865.

A brief study of our annual pension appropriations is illuminating. After the Civil War, our pension disbursements naturally increased as more and more names were placed on the rolls. In 1874 they had reached \$30,000,000, and then the decline began; but then also began the period of artificial pension legislation of questionable propriety. Up to 1878 pensions were paid only to disabled soldiers and their dependents, but in 1879, Congress passed a law granting full arrears to all persons entitled to pensions, and our expenditures leaped, in two years, \$20,000,000—from \$37,000,000 in 1878 to \$57,000,000 in 1880. This increase was so great that Congress then passed an amendment providing that the claim for arrears must have been filed prior to 1880. Through the payment of arrears

our pension appropriations soared, and in 1888 had reached \$82,-000,000. In that year, the limitation as to the time of filing a claim for arrears so far as widows were concerned was removed, and this opened the door to all kinds of fraud. The tempting prize of thousands of dollars of arrears was too much for numbers of "widows," many of whom were negroes, and there can be no doubt that many persons were beneficiaries of the government's bounty, who were not entitled to it.

An Era of Extravagance

Under the influence of this legislation and of "Corporal" Tanner, a member of the Grand Army of the Republic, who became pension commissioner at that time, and who is credited with the statement "God help the (Treasury) surplus when I get at it," our pension bill grew in two years to \$109,000,000. In 1890, an act was passed pensioning every soldier who had served not less than ninety days in the Civil War, and was so disabled that he could not earn a living by manual labor, but the disability need not have arisen from war service, provided it was not caused by vicious habits. The act also pensioned widows of soldiers who had married before 1890, and provided that they need not prove that the soldier's death was due to causes brought on by the war. The result was that our pension disbursements skyrocketed \$52,-000,000 in three years, and reached \$161,000,000 in 1893. The strong stand of President Cleveland checked this waste of public funds for a while, and the efforts of the commissioner of pensions under him, Mr. William Lochren, unearthed enormous frauds. Mr. Lochren dropped 2,266 names from the pension rolls, and reduced the ratings in 3,343 cases. Pension disbursements, under his administration and without any change in the law, fell from \$161,000,000 to \$143,000,000 in a single year.

To show how graft of all kinds had permeated our pension system, let me point out that in 1899 Commissioner of Pensions H. Clay Evans, after investigation, disqualified 24,662 of the registered pension attorneys, leaving only 18,431 to practice before the bureau.

It is impossible, however, to go into particulars. In 1907, 1908, and 1912 further pension legislation was passed, and now we have practically a service pension, as every veteran over sixty-two

years of age, even though not disabled, is entitled to a pension. The war between the states is a memory of fifty years ago. Five years after the war, in 1870, there were 198,000 pensioners on the rolls; in 1915, half a century after the declaration of peace, there were 748,147 persons receiving government aid, of whom 691,606 are Civil War pensioners. In 1870 our pension bill was \$29,000,000; in 1915, it was \$166,000,000; and bills have recently been introduced providing for larger and more pensions.

Our Pension Disbursements Largest in the World

Our pension disbursements in 1913 were \$176,714,000—five times as much as France, seven times as much as Germany, ten times as much as Great Britain, and twenty-three times as much as Austria Hungary. These four great European powers combined spent for pensions that year only \$84,000,000, or less than one-half as much as the United States.

Let me repeat that every soldier who was disabled, or whose health was impaired, during the war, and his dependents after his death, should have a pension, but no one is entitled to government aid simply because he enlisted for ninety days, even though he had never seen a battle-field and had suffered no injuries whatsoever.

Now what is the method of obtaining a pension? Let us assume that a man claims to have been disabled during the war and desires a pension. He files an application with the Pension Bureau, and if the War Department can give no information as to his disabilities, he is requested to furnish evidence. This evidence is purely of an *ex parte* character, and consists of affidavits filed by the soldier from comrades, officers in his regiment, etc., alleging that they knew personally of his injury. This was a fruitful source of fraud, especially some years ago. There was a natural tendency among the old soldiers to reciprocate with each other on the principle, "If I swear to his 'disability' he will swear to mine." And every doubt is solved in favor of the old soldier.

Some Striking Illustrations

Two instances of "disability" will be instructive.

Mr. Charles D. Long, while serving actively as Judge of the Supreme Court of Michigan, was drawing \$72 per month for "total

and permanent helplessness," though this pension was reduced in 1893 to \$50 per month.

General John C. Black in 1878 was pensioned at the rate of \$100 per month by special Act of Congress on the ground that he was "a physical wreck, maimed and diseased, incapable of any effort and much of the time confined to his bed." Since then this "physical wreck" was Commissioner of Pensions for four years, served one term in Congress, and later was chairman of the Civil Service Commission for nine years, during all of which time he continued to draw his pension of \$1,200 per year, in addition to his salary of \$5,000 as commissioner, \$5,000 as representative, and \$4,500 as chairman of the Civil Service Commission. These are but two striking cases, though a great many similar ones could be cited.

The Mighty Pension Grip

Surely if there is "pork" in any Congressional legislation, it is in our pension bills. So skillfully distributed has been this form of government bounty, and so closely akin to love of country is gratitude to the worthy veteran, that men's voices have been stilled, when they should have been raised in protest against the abuses of our pension system. So-called "reformers" who attack river and harbor legislation dare not turn the searchlight of publicity upon the evils that have crept into our pension disbursements; they dare not call attention to the real "pork barrel," the pension bill, because many pensions, and more liberal pensions, are very near and dear to the 748,000 recipients of the government's favor, and their relatives and friends, who are powerful at the polls.

Some idea of the importance of pension gratuities as purely financial propositions appears from the fact that in 1915 the amount paid in pensions to citizens of Ohio was \$15,666,000, Pennsylvania \$15,275,000, New York \$13,791,000, Illinois \$11,409,000, Indiana \$10,096,000, Iowa \$5,621,000, and Wisconsin \$3,995,000. Let us compare this Ohio fifteen and a half million pension crop, which never has a bad year and costs its beneficiaries nothing, with the Louisiana sugar crop, worth about twenty to twenty-five millions gross per annum, which is very expensive to produce, and is frequently the victim of bad seasons and adverse legislation. Is it any wonder that members of Congress from Ohio are pension enthusiasts?

The Special Pension Bill Evil

But the story is not yet told. Our pension laws are liberal, very liberal; in fact, they practically give a service pension, and every surviving Civil War veteran is believed to be on the rolls. Liberal as are these laws, they do not include all who desire pensions, and covering these cases, special bills are introduced giving a pension to, or increasing the pension of, some individual. Sometimes the bill is to correct the military record of a deserter, and grant him an honorable discharge, so that he may draw a pension under the existing law. Since 1861 Congress has allowed 47,398 pensions by means of special acts. Of these, 21,648, with an annual value of \$6,640,722, are still on the pension roll. The Sixty-Third Congress passed 5,061 private pension bills at an annual cost to the government of \$1,526,598.

These acts give pensions, or increases of pensions, to those who cannot qualify under existing most liberal laws, because of lack of evidence as to service, desertion from the ranks, not sufficient "disability," or for some other reason. Some of these bills may be worthy, but an immense number of them are not. No safeguards are thrown around pension legislation; no investigation is made prior to the introduction of the bill; and its consideration by the pension committees of Congress must necessarily be brief and cursory, when we recall that 5,061 bills of this character were passed last Congress, and, of course, this is only part of the number introduced and investigated by the committees. It is a physical impossibility to give each of these special bills a calm, judicial investigation in order to ascertain the real facts. They are of necessity put through in a hurry.

An examination of the *Congressional Record* shows that among the chief offenders in the introduction of these special pension bills are some of those "reformers" who have recently been so blatantly denouncing river and harbor appropriations. In one instance three-fourths of all the bills introduced during the Sixty-Third Congress by a Member who was very bitter in his criticism of river and harbor "pork" were special pension bills.

Pension Extravagance Should Stop

Our Civil War pension laws are written upon our statute books, and probably the greater part of the disbursements caused by them

have already been made. Let us hope so at least. These legislative mistakes are part of our history. We cannot correct them, but we can and should prevent the enactment of similar legislation in regard to wars since the Civil War. There are now 28,912 Spanish war pensioners on our rolls, and they received last year \$3,851,701. This is entirely legitimate, for it is only proper that the republic should pension those who were disabled in its service and their dependents, and the dependents of those killed in its service, but we must beware of entering upon a career of artificial legislation for these veterans, such as characterized the period after the Civil War.

Pensions Confer Only Private Benefits

Let us remember that the \$5,025,193,970 paid for pensions have been mere expenditures; money which we have had to pay out, and from which no dividends have ever been derived. These vast sums have been all outgo and no income. Pension bills are in their nature private bills. They give money to private individuals, and no one is directly benefited by a pension except the party receiving it.

On the contrary, bills for public buildings, and rivers and harbors, are public bills—they disburse money for public purposes and the public gets the benefit. The government, like a vast business corporation, must have houses in which to conduct its affairs. It must build or rent, offices, post offices, court houses, custom houses, etc., and these structures, for which in all \$363,967,276 has been appropriated, are the property of the government—they belong to, and benefit all the people, and not any particular individual. They are public assets, and in most cases have earned fair interest on their cost.

Splendid Waterway Investments

The \$800,000,000 appropriated for waterways since the American Revolution are investments which have yielded, and will continue to yield, in their great aids to transportation, perpetual dividends to the American people. For the stupendous sum of more than five billions lavished on pensions, we have nothing, absolutely nothing, of tangible public benefit to show. That money is gone, and gone forever. For our river and harbor expenditures, however, we have, and posterity will have for all time, our splendid

improved harbors, great marts of trade, where giant ships dock at their wharves; our Great Lakes, vast inland seas, where a hundred millions have been spent, and which carry the largest and cheapest volume of water-borne freight on earth; and our rivers, like the Ohio and the Black Warrior, heretofore almost unnavigable, but now being improved by locks and dams, and made great arteries of commerce. These are permanent public works which help to make our country the richest and best on the face of the earth. Improved waterways are freight carriers and rate regulators; they are commerce builders; they are creators of prosperity. There are only three cities in the United States of over 150,000 population, and none reaching 250,000, which are not on navigable water. Practically every metropolis of ancient and modern times was located on a navigable stream or the ocean. Improved waterways make quick, convenient, and economical transportation, and such transportation of products is essential to national prosperity.

To summarize, I am convinced that charges of pork barrel as applied to rivers and harbors, and public buildings, are in the main unjust and slanderous; but I cannot say the same about pensions. And not only has pension legislation been enormously expensive in actual outlay of money, but I fear its advocates have done much to demoralize American politics and to lower the high standard in which Congress should be held. The cost of the pension pork barrel has been very high.